

## TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*: A CRITIQUE OF JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST* AND BLACK PATRIARCHY

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### ABSTARCT

*Toni Morrison, through her voluminous and complex novel, Paradise (1997) deconstructs the Christian notion of heaven and hell; and substantiates that the original sin is not always disobedience, as too much obedience hampers growth and produces stunted minds. She suggests through the novel that human experience is more meaningful and truthful than any ethnocentric fallacy. The present paper is an endeavor to study how the African-American writer embraces the postmodernist stance to challenge the Christian Ethnocentrism as well as Black Patriarchy in the novel. The Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison criticizes the hegemonic paradigm of philosophizing everything and dividing the entire world between the binaries like good and evil, moral and immoral, right and wrong, faith and skepticism, male and female, etc. She refers indirectly to Moral Relativism and puts forth the point that real liberalism paves the path to experience paradise on this very earthly earth. Another point discussed in the paper is the author's sensitivity about the issue of the discriminatory treatment given to black women by black men and refers to the biased attitude shown towards black women during the Civil Rights Movement. The novel is a comment on the patriarchal trends shown during the Civil Rights Movement. The black women of the United States of America faced gender-discrimination in the hands of the black men during the movement. It is noticeable that the one of the major reasons of the origin of the Black Feminist Movement has been the marginalization of black women as well as issues related to them in the Civil Rights Movement.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ethnocentrism, Black Patriarchy, Christian fundamentalism, Paradise, Liberation, Conservatism

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### INRODUCTION

*Paradise* (1997) is a novel in which the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison embraces a postmodernist stance to criticize the hegemonic paradigm of philosophizing everything and the religious predisposition of dividing the entire world between the binaries like good and evil, moral and immoral, right and wrong, religious and irreligious, male and female, etc. The African-American author challenges the Christian Ethnocentrism as well as Black Patriarchy in the novel. She refers indirectly to Moral Relativism<sup>1</sup> and puts forth the point that real liberalism paves the path to experience paradise on this very earthly earth. However, moral relativism is used in the context of Christian fundamentalism. Toni Morrison believes that the most important and crucial concern in life is to know 'when to stop' (*Beloved* 102); so she also explores the difference between liberation and conservatism in *Paradise* as she expresses in an interview with Carolyn Denard: 'The liberation movement, the movement to free oneself to be completely independent – as a community not as an individual – is marvelous. But how one moves from liberation to conservation is what I explore. How you can make a liberation gesture and how it can make you end up as the world's most static conservative' (Morrison, Toni. Fall 1998. Personal Interview). Through her voluminous and complex book, she deconstructs the Christian notion of heaven and hell; and substantiates that the

original sin is not always disobedience, as too much obedience hampers growth and produces stunted minds. She suggests through the novel that human experience is more meaningful and truthful than any ethnocentric fallacy. Another issue she raises in the novel is the discriminatory treatment given to black women by black men and here she refers to the biased attitude shown towards black women during the Civil Rights Movement. It is noticeable that the one of the major reasons of the origin of the Black Feminist Movement has been the marginalization of black women as well as issues related to them in the Civil Rights Movement.

## DISCUSSIONS

The novel, *Paradise*, opens in 1976 and unfolds the story of a conflict between the self-acclaimed masters of an all-black town called Ruby in Oklahoma<sup>2</sup> and a bunch of women living in an old building seventeen miles away from Ruby. The group has four black and one white woman and the very first page of the book reveals that the desperate masters of Ruby attack to massacre these wayward women. Ruby's history dates back to 1870s when a group of pure black African-American families escaped their miserable lives in Mississippi and Louisiana and started their journey to Oklahoma in search of freedom and happiness. On the way they were flabbergasted as they faced rejection not only by whites but by comparatively light-skinned blacks also. The insult proved to be too much for them and they decided to establish an all-black town in which miscegenation would be strictly prohibited. The town was eventually named as Haven and proved to be a real heaven for its black population until the World War II, after which people started moving out of the town in search of new opportunities. As the population became thin in the town gradually, some strong-headed grandsons of the town decided to move the entire town to a new location leaving behind some old people who were not ready to move as they believed that their grandchildren would come back to them.

This time the new paradise is named Ruby. However, the situation becomes problematic in the town when the third generation leaders of the town refuse to change themselves according to the changed needs. The isolation and conservatism, that has been the need for survival in the old times, is imposed strictly on the younger generation of Ruby. In these circumstances the Convent, a refuge to a bunch of troubled women who are trying to survive various tragedies of life, becomes a natural threat to the philosophy so seriously followed by Ruby's self-acclaimed masters. Disturbed by the rising conflicts with the younger generation, they blame the Convent women for the stir amongst the youth. They decide to nip the evil in the bud by killing the five harmless women. Toni Morrison, as she tells Carolyn Denard, took the idea for the plot from two sources: first one is an advertisement in an old Black newspaper that encouraged the people to move to the west of the country to settle in all-black towns – their own little paradises. In the advertisement it was mentioned: 'Come Prepared or not at all' (Morrison, Toni. Fall 1998. Personal Interview). The sentence means that black people should make arrangements to take care of themselves. The other source is what Toni Morrison heard during her trip to Brazil in 1980s about a convent of black nuns who used to take-in deserted children and practiced an Afro-American religion. The local people considered them as an outrage and the nuns were murdered by a posse of men. In short, Toni Morrison in *Paradise* wants to explore why survival of a particular group means inclusion of some and exclusion of others and how Paradise can be achieved or shunned.

In the novel the Convent is initially started as a residential school for girls, but the authorities have to close the school as the number of students dwindles. After the closure of the school only three women, two sisters Mary Magna and Sister Roberta and an orphan called Consolata (Connie), are left there. Connie has been picked up by Mary Magna as a 'certainly not a white urchin' (*Paradise* p223) sitting on a heap of garbage in 1925. For nine-year-old Connie it proves to

be a rescue as she has been exposed to the realities of a homeless female's life in 'the shit-strewn paths of that city' (*Paradise* 223). Mary Magna keeps Connie with her for the rest of her life and teaches her many things like making deodorants and medicines and growing vegetables and spices. After spending thirty years there in the Convent, one day Connie meets the already-married Deacon Morgan and has a short, as Deacon Morgan ditches Connie all of a sudden, but intense affair with him. Afterwards Connie and Soane, Deacon's wife, become very good friends. With the passage of time Sister Roberta also leaves the place and Mary Magna becomes very sick and Connie becomes the over all in-charge of the place. Gradually the Convent becomes a refuge for the women who willingly or unwillingly reach there after having bitter and distressing experiences.

Mavis, the first one in the row, reaches there with the guilt of killing her twin-children accidentally and with the fear that her daughter wants to kill her to take the revenge. In fact, Mavis has led a very confused life with an ignorant husband and five children before coming to the Convent. It is noticeable that she believes that her husband is right in calling her 'the dumbest bitch on the planet' (*Paradise* p37). One day she leaves behind her twin infants in the car and becomes busy in buying something interesting for dinner to please her wilful husband who does not believe in spending each night with Mavis. After the death of the twins Mavis gets a feeling that her elder daughter, along with the other two children, wants to kill her so she leaves the house to go somewhere safe. However, she realizes that she does not know anybody well in the city as Frank, her husband, has always found 'ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship' (*Paradise* 27). Finally she decides to go to her mother's place. Somehow she reaches there but only to find that her mother also wants her to go back to her house. Mavis starts her journey again and this time she thinks that her destination will be California but her car breaks down near the Convent and she enters the big house to ask for some gasoline. She gets it that very day but she stays there in the Convent for two years and after that also she goes away for short durations only as the Convent becomes her home.

Next is Grace (Gigi), who comes there to see 'A man and woman fucking forever' (*Paradise* 113) and to meet her boyfriend, Mikey. She finds neither of the two but stays in the Convent to get relieved of the pain of loss of all the good things in life. There in the Convent she starts a casual affair with K.D. as he finds her very attractive and she finds the affair useful in her try to forget her painful past. Then comes Seneca, a heart-broken girl who has seen so many black women crying in her life that now she tries to help them out. She has experienced a troublesome childhood as Jean, her sister with whom she has been living from the beginning, mysteriously disappears one morning leaving behind a five-year-old confused Seneca. In the end of the novel it is clarified that Jean, in fact, is her mother who has given birth to Seneca at the age of fourteen and to hide the truth she pretends to be Seneca's sister. However, little Seneca, while waiting for her sister/mother to return, tries to do all the things that she thinks can please her sister/mother happy. But finally on the sixth day a case-worker comes and takes her to a foster- house. Seneca experiences many ups and downs in life. At present she is heart-broken because of her rude and arrogant boyfriend, Eddie; who is in prison for running his car over a child. Seneca tries to help him by providing him whatever he wants in prison, but her every effort makes him more angry. She even goes to Eddie's home-town to ask his mother to pay for the lawyer. However, Mrs. Turtle, her boyfriend's mother and a woman with slender means of income, refuses to help her spoiled son. Seneca leaves Mrs. Turtle's house with a heavy heart as she listens the woman crying a lot in solitude for her good-for-nothing son and her own helplessness. When Seneca reaches the bus-stand she comes to know that she has to wait for two hours for her bus. After a while, she meets a rich woman called Mrs. Norma Keene Fox who needs Seneca to do some personal and confidential work of hers for which she will give five hundred dollars to Seneca. Seneca, after the initial reluctance, agrees and goes with the lady to her palatial house. There

she happily spends three weeks with Mrs. Fox and leaves the house with five hundred dollars and some nice clothes. Seneca finds it difficult to decide what to do and where to go. She has three options: 'Get a job near the prison and stand by [Eddie]? Meaning follow his instructions, Pick up her life-before Eddie? Or should she just move on?' (*Paradisep* 138). She decides to go for the third option. Eventually she reaches the Convent along with Sweetie whom she finds walking purposelessly on the road with uncombed hair and crumpled clothes. Seneca thinks that Sweetie is crying but actually the girl is smiling after a long period of six years without even knowing it. Both of them get a warm welcome in the Convent. Sweetie, after coming to her normal-self, blames the women in the Convent for misguiding her, but Seneca starts living there happily in the company of the three women. The last one is Pallas who does not speak as she has lost her voice after seeing her boyfriend, Carlos, making love to her mother. Pregnant and shocked she reaches the Convent where on seeing the sympathetic Connie she finds her voice back. Pallas returns to her house after spending a few days in the Convent; but feels uncomfortable in her own house and comes back to the Convent where she gives birth to her child.

Connie takes all these troubled women on a spiritual journey<sup>3</sup> from their outer tortured selves to the inner reconciled ones achieved by togetherness, sharing and confrontation. Disturbed by the self-sufficiency of these women the patrons of Ruby try to kill these women because they think that these women are a threat to the culture and unity of their all black town. However, the real reason for the attack is the chauvinism of these orthodox patriarchs who, unable to change themselves, find it impossible to understand the young generation of their town. In fact, the youth of the town feels suffocated in the closed atmosphere of Ruby as Anna Flood puts it before Reverend Misner that the young people of the town 'need more than what's here' (*Paradisep* 117). However, the conservative and stubborn leaders try to control the rebellion by threatening the youngsters, but after failing in their attempt they blame the Convent women for ill-advising and misleading their progeny. They think that their pure blood can be polluted by the outside women. Moreover, it is suggested in the novel that these top guns of the town want the land of the Convent for their own benefit. Thus in this novel Morrison shows that the oppressor is not the white male but the black one who because of his baseless assumptions and fears fails to appreciate an independent and self-reliant group of harmless women. Channette Romero rightly comments: 'The town leaders are outraged by the idea that these women live without men or Christian God in their lives.... [moreover] the women's ability to come to terms with their pasts exposes the failure of the citizens of Ruby to confront their own traumatic histories. Silencing these women provides an outlet for the anger that the townspeople have for their own static lifestyle as they deny and cover over Ruby's limitations' (Romero, Channette p 416).

*Paradise* can be read as a novel with two endings: one – that all the women in the Convent are killed by a group of conceited men as told by Patricia; another – that all the women are not injured so they take the injured ones with them and escape in the Cadillac as suggested by Anna Flood. The second version is more reliable as no dead-bodies are found there and the Cadillac is also not there. The attackers are sure that they have injured one and killed one woman but they themselves are not sure about the other three. Moreover, it is noticeable that Lone is left alone in the Convent with the injured woman and the dead Connie, and after everybody has gone she looks back at the house and says: 'A lot of work' (*Paradisep* 292). It is quite possible that Lone, who is skilled in black magic and witchcraft and who has taught the art of 'raising the dead' (*Paradise* p242) to Connie also, brings the dead one back to life and cures the injured one also. Connie, who is told by Lone about her talent, has already used it successfully to save Scout's, Deacon's son's, life and later she prolongs Mary Magna's life by using the magic. Eventually, these women, free of their troubling pasts, are ready to start all anew. In the novel Soane and Anna Flood, though the residents of Ruby, try their level best to help the women in the Convent. Soane is quite friendly with Connie. Billie Delia is another one who knows the reality of the women in the

Convent. She herself is ill-treated by the town's people and misunderstood by her mother. However, she is not ready to tolerate beyond a limit and so she leaves the town to start her life somewhere else. She gets a job in Demby in a clinic and tries to lead an independent life. She is the one who has brought the troubled Pallas to the Convent and tells her that the Convent is a place where she can stay for a while and feel safe. She even suggests that the place is better than her own home town as there she can take her time to recollect herself: '“Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone – whichever way you want it.”' (*Paradise* p176).

The novel is a comment on the patriarchal trends shown during the Civil Rights Movement. Black women of the country faced gender-discrimination in the hands of the black men during the movement. *Paradise* opens in 1976, the time around the Civil Rights Movement in America. The freedom was equated with the redemption of black masculinity in the movement as the male activists believed that the catastrophe of racism was the loss of black manhood. There was total disregard for the issues pertaining to the experience of black women. Black male leaders often made strong statements which were undiluted refusals of the claims of the equality of black men and women: '[Amiri] Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature. The two do not submit to one another; rather, the woman submits to her black man' (Quoted in 'But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States' 7). The female activists recorded many instances where during the organizational meetings they were not only treated disrespectfully but also directed to do the chores considered appropriate for their gender because the male leaders stressed that a woman's role was that of a helpmate to her man. The black female activists felt the irony of the black movement in which no freedom was entitled to them as the white patriarchy was being replaced by the black one. In addition to this, as bell hooks points out in her book, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, the writings of the male leaders were full of misogynist thoughts. She also records the typical response of a brain-washed female: 'I think the woman should be behind the man. The man should be up first before women because... men represent the symbol of the races' (p 182). Toni Morrison conveys the message to the black male that he cannot imitate the white male by trying to create a paradise for him self by suppressing the black female. If he dares also then his heaven will not last forever. He should get over the mentality of seeing the black female only as a mere helper in his ventures and should accept her worth and respect her individuality.

Moreover, Toni Morrison refers to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), implicitly; and thus criticizes the Christian fundamentalism. Ruby is a town where people follow Christianity and the Convent actually is a replica of Hell with its sensuous artifacts and chaotic lifestyle of the inhabitants who do not believe in living disciplined lives. A pandemonium is created by Connie as she rejects Christianity and follows paganism and witchcraft. Milton describes that the original sin has been caused by disobedience, Morrison shows that disobeying the traditional norms can lead to the path of redemption and self-realization. Connie shows that it is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven as expressed by Satan. Banished from the symbolic black Paradise that is Ruby, these women experience bliss and salvation in Hell that is Convent; and finally they come back to the Earth that is their own cities to create a Paradise of one of their own. Thus Toni Morrison conveys again and openly in this novel, as she has partially suggested in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) already, that terms like heaven and hell, good and evil, moral and immoral, faith and skepticism are connotative and relative. Christianity cannot control all the faiths throughout the world. What is called paganism by them is religion for others, what is called witchcraft by them is ethnicity for others and what is defined as immoral by them is a ritual for others. Moreover, it is ironical that the pure black forefathers and masters of the town neither feel any problem with the religion imposed on them by the whites, nor the urge to revive their black roots; they, rather, try to kill the women who deny Christianity by opting

for other alternate practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Toni Morrison proves again in *Paradise* that the rules charted for the Anglo-Saxon world will not do any good to African- Americans. It is the irony in the novel that Ruby, and before that Haven, has been created as a paradise for the pure black people but due to their stubbornness and dogmatism they make it a hell where a group of elderly people tyrannize all the others. On the other hand, the marginalized women of Convent, after facing so many ups and downs in their lives, and committing a few mistakes also; eventually reinvent themselves by rejecting the hegemony and the rules set by the self-obsessed oppressors. The novel ends with these women as happy and satisfied, and living away from the burden of home and hearth. They are not indifferent towards their families and relations but they want a life of their own also. They, as Toni Morrison seems to suggest, make their own paradise on this very earth by following the path of sisterhood<sup>4</sup> and a religion of their own.

## Notes

- Moral Relativism is a term used by Greek philosophers in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to put forth that there are no obvious truths and universally accepted moral values. The term is discussed in relation to Post-Modernism and also in reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's announcement 'God is Dead' in the contemporary times to convey that religion and belief are not real but relative as nothing can be described clearly and objectively.
- The All-Black towns of Oklahoma represent a unique chapter in American history. Many African American men and women came together to create, occupy, and govern their own communities here. From 1865 to 1920 African Americans created more than fifty identifiable towns and settlements.
- In the novel all the troubled women experience bliss by performing some rituals and the group is led by Connie. Here Toni Morrison, as Giselle Anatol explains, refers religion of candomblé—an Afro-Brazilian religion that blends aspects of Judeo-Christianity with traditional West African beliefs.
- The Black Womanist writers agree that Sisterhood is very important for the African-American Women to survive in a world rampant with racism and sexism as Toni Morrison also reveals: 'Our friendships with one another are the currency of our lives. They may be the only currency of our lives. In the absence of so many support systems, we are it for each other.'

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